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ABSTRACT

An alternative to the often artificial writing workshop model focuses on learning through imitation and on the writing process rather than the product. This alternative model also involves considerably more reading than a typical workshop class, requiring students to read the way writers do, with a critical understanding and an awareness of the "performance" of the writing. Students examine and imitate not only finished works but also the writing that went into them--the generation, arrangement, and revision of the material that makes up a story or poem. Constraints on the teacher's ability to involve students in the different phases and variations of the writing process include the lack of time, the relative dearth of texts that describe what writers actually do, the requirement of grading, and students' possible unwillingness to surrender some measure of "self-expression" for imitation. As a reasonable compromise, teachers would require a great deal of imitative work but base grades on works the students choose. Many students will find that their best work, the writing most distinctly their own, is that done in response to the assignments rather than written independently. (Sample writing process exercises and their objectives are included.) (HTH)

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Beyond the Workshop:
Some Alternatives for the Undergraduate Creative Writing Course

We all know the problem. Though we may differ on its specific qualities, the "workshop" poem or story is a creature with which we are all too familiar. Characterized by a surface proficiency without daring, content that is innocuous if unoriginal, and a cultivated awareness of current literary fashions, it is essentially flawless--and dull. It resists criticism the way a new species of insect resists insecticide: We can't fault it, no matter how bad we may feel about it, because it has evolved directly in response to the kinds of criticism we raise in our workshops. Indeed, the "workshop" piece may even be a good model for a sort of literary success. At a recent reading I heard a much praised young poet introduce a group of poems with the comment that she had discovered she had nothing to write about and so started writing about that. I'm afraid our workshops are turning out writers who have nothing to say and say it continually.

Actually, not having a clear subject or ideas about it is not necessarily a bad thing, at least for beginning writers. On the undergraduate level such a condition may be not only a fact of life for most of our students but also a desirable

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situation for us as teachers implying as it does the young writer's openness to experience and the possibility of learning. The problem arises when we ask students to polish that emptiness into a personal voice or style. It may appear that we are encouraging self-expression by doing this--and self-expression seems a laudable goal--but we run the risk of substituting the perfection of a surface for the more complex process of genuine self-discovery in creation. We produce not only "workshop" pieces but also "workshop" writers, and we give students a false idea of both what writers do and why they do it.

I'd like to propose an alternative to the workshop model of teaching. One aspect of this alternative model is quite traditional, though often ignored; that is the importance of imitation. As Theodore Roethke put it, "Imitation, conscious imitation, is one of the great methods, perhaps the method of learning to write."[1] Roethke had his own students imitate poets ranging from Ben Jonson to Stanley Kunitz. The immediate product was, of course, imitations, but the end result--as seen later in the work of James Wright, Richard Hugo, and others--has been some of the best verse of our time. The second aspect of my model is perhaps a bit more radical: I'd like to shift the focus of the undergraduate writing course from the product of writing, the finished poem or story, to the process of writing. Actually, the workshop model does indirectly give students a picture of the writing process; that is, that a writer develops a rough draft of

a piece over a specified length of time, discusses ways to improve it with colleagues, makes corrections, and calls it finished. But, as we all know, writers don't work in workshops. Compositional methods are infinitely more varied and complex than this, and a writing class should give students the opportunity to experiment with as many different approaches as possible. Both of these suggestions--the emphasis on imitation and the focus on the process of writing more than its product--are grounded on the assumption that the primary goal of the undergraduate writing class is not the production of finished poems and stories; that goal leads to "workshop" pieces. Rather, the aim of the model I am proposing is to prepare students to become writers. The actual work produced is of less importance than the experiences the students have undergone in producing it. It may be exciting for both teacher and student to see a well crafted "workshop" piece appear in a literary magazine, but I think we serve undergraduates better by laying the foundations for later work that can go beyond the limitations of the workshop.

What would such an alternative writing course look like? For one thing, it would involve considerably more reading than a typical workshop class. Some years ago I worked with the poet Thom Gunn as an assistant in a large beginning creative writing course. In reponse to one student's questions about the amount and breadth of reading assigned, Gunn replied, "Writing comes from writing." His comment reflects the one common denominator that comes up when writers are asked to describe how they learned to write: that they started by

reading--sometimes enviously, sometimes angrily, but always voraciously. Students, of course, read in literature classes, but the aim in the writing course is to get them to read the way writers do, with not only a critical understanding but an awareness of the "performance" of the writing, if you will: the problems involved in the execution of the piece and the writer's different strategies for success. If this makes writing sound like something of a sports event, the metaphor is not entirely inappropriate. A writer has to learn his "moves," and the verbal shadow boxing of a Hemingway or a Mailer, for all its macho posing, reflects a necessary engagement with writers past.

There are different techniques to get students reading this way. Roethke, for instance, had his young poets compile a personal anthology of verse gleaned from their independent reading over the term, including not only their favorite poems but comments on what specific aspects the students found most useful for their development.[2] Imitation is an obvious method for encouraging students to engage their reading. I've had success with asking beginning poets to imitate the sudden shifts of tone and rhetoric in a John Ashbery piece. The poems produced, of course, are often horrible and always incoherent, but it's clear from the students' non-imitative work that they now have a new "move" at their command--call it the "Ashbery shuffle"--and, more importantly, a new awareness of the role of tone and rhetoric in their own work. This awareness could be developed in a workshop setting through

careful discussion of a student's own work, but I suspect that the imitative assignment does it more quickly. Because the poem produced is clearly an imitation of a style and sensibility foreign to their own, students' feelings are not deeply involved in the work; the defensiveness a teacher often encounters in raising sensitive issues like emotional tone or obscurity in a class member's poem is not present. Imitation forces the student outside himself, freeing him, in effect, from the responsibility of being sincere. Once free of the demand to be "himself," he can discover and experiment with techniques he would not otherwise have encountered. These, in turn, might later be incorporated into a new sense of his own style--writing comes from writing.

Thom Gunn's use of the word "writing" refers, of course, to that which is written, the words on the page. I'd like to go a bit further with the idea of writing coming from writing and suggest that students need to examine and imitate not only finished works but the writing that went into them; that is, the generation, arrangement, and revision of the material that makes up a story or poem. Too often, I think, we assume that because beginning writers can produce work, bad as it may be, they know all they need to know about the process of writing. We then concentrate on improving what they've turned out. Doing this, we confirm the student in the one method of writing he knows instead of exposing him to others. A parallel technique--say, in a cooking class--would be to spend a term perfecting a student's ability to

crack, mix and fry eggs because the first project he happened to submit was scrambled eggs. Our master scrambler may never discover that there are other ways to cook eggs, let alone other things to cook. He may even find himself with chef's block, induced most likely by the half-conscious realization that his entire oeuvre is just oeufs.

The pun is mine but the metaphor is not. It comes from Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers, a book which, though not specifically about the composition of poetry and fiction, has a great deal to say about the importance of concentration on the process of writing as distinguished from its product. His two central metaphors of cooking--developing interactions between different kinds of material--and growing--finding new connections and directions in the words on the page--provide an illuminating model of what actually happens when we write.[3] For clarity, I'd like to divide the writing process into three stages: the generation of material, its selection and arrangement into a draft, and the revision of the draft into a finished text. These stages, of course, vary from writer to writer, but they do provide a useful way of thinking about the writing process and organizing a course around it. Elbow's work is especially helpful on the beginning of the writing process, the actual generation of words on paper. This first stage, the ten per cent inspiration that precedes all that sweat, may seem to those of us who write regularly like the easiest, most enjoyable part of the activity. But for undergraduates, many of whom have only recently escaped from freshman English, it is often

the hardest. As Elbow notes, students in composition courses are more often than not given a model which precludes much creative thinking: the old think-then-write approach in which the writer's meaning is first supposed to be clarified in his head or preferably in an outline and then the proper words to express that meaning are found. This is, of course, the reverse of the process as most writers describe it; it denies the vital element of discovery through writing. As Richard Hugo put it, "I would far rather mean what I say than say what I mean."[4] Traditional literature classes, I'm afraid, are also not much help to the young poet or fiction writer because they invariably leave the impression that Joyce or Melville figured out what he was "trying to say" and then covered it over with style, symbolism, and other kinds of literary wrapping paper for the astute class to undo. It's no wonder that creative writing students' first submissions are often characterized by an abstract sense of moral or "deep inner truth" with clichés huddled around it for support. They are just following Brooks and Warren, trying to say what they mean rather than mean what they say.

A good workshop can teach students to replace the clichés with more original images and define the abstraction more specifically, but it would be far more useful, I think, to have them experience the way real writing really starts. The variety here is endless. Take the writer's notebook, for example. It can be largely fragmented and free-form, geared toward exploration of the unconscious, like those of Roethke, or it can be more systematic, with daily entries involving

a particular scene or idea, like those of William Stafford.[5] Each approach could be imitated for a few weeks and the results compared. Or consider the actual physical practice of writing, the time and place. It may be difficult to get students to write each morning before dawn the way Stafford and Philip Levine do[6]--I certainly couldn't work this way--but the more ways of generating material they undertake the freer they will become in their own invention and the more likely they will be to discover something useful. More specific imitative assignments can be derived from the practice of particular writers. Students, for example, could be asked to build a poem from a prose paragraph in the Yeatsian manner or develop a narrative from questions about a figure in a room, as Joan Didion did in starting A Book of Common Prayer.[7] They could experiment with the mechanics of writing, using a typewriter instead of a pen or writing with a blindfold and earplugs on, a method David Wagoner has employed.[8] Obviously not all of these ways of getting started will be suitable for every student. But, as in the imitation of published texts, the artificiality--in some cases the very oddity--of the processes they imitate has a liberating effect. The goal is not great writing but varied experience, and the rationale for this kind of imitation is that this is the way writers actually start working, as distinguished from what the textbooks say.

Similar imitative exercises can involve students in the later stages of the writing process. After material has been generated, it has to be selected and arranged. This second

stage of writing is, again, generally left out of the workshop; the assumption is that students already know how to select their best work for discussion in class. In actuality, they may be choosing not their best work but rather the pieces most finished or easiest to discuss, neglecting the odd line or scene in their notebooks which, though rough, has the most potential. It was this kind of fragment, "the single phrase of real poetry,"[9] that Roethke focussed on in his teaching, to the extent that young poets like Tess Gallagher found themselves at the end of his class with a collection of good lines and images but few wholly satisfactory poems. As Gallagher notes, the self-skepticism involved here, based as it is on an awareness of what "real poetry" should be, is much more valuable for a young writer than the gratification produced by vague praise for completed works.[10] Exercises can improve not only students' critical judgment of their own writing but also their sense of its potential. Assignments in both selection--finding the three most interesting potential stories in a mass of notebook material--and arrangement--constructing a draft entirely from disconnected fragments or from two seemingly opposite passages--along with discussion of writers' journals and their relation to their work, can begin to reveal the possibilities, giving students different kinds of "sieves" with which to sift their material. If they are able to examine and as much as possible imitate some of the writers' vastly different approaches to this stage of the writing process--Mary McCarthy's construction of a novel from independently

written stories, for example, or Louis Simpson's development of several different poems from one set of notes[11]--they can learn to find and arrange not necessarily the best material for discussion but the most promising work for an eventual story or poem.

It is at the final stage of composition, the revision of drafts, that the workshop has its most value. But here too a great potential for variety is often overlooked. The standard workshop approach is to break the poem or story into sections, identify the problems--a faulty characterization here, a clicheéd image there, too much irrelevant description in the middle--and send the student back to work on the different parts. Some writers do work this way, but there are other methods which may lead students to considerably different results. Louise Glück, for example, makes no corrections on a draft sheet but instead continually types and retypes the poem on which she is working, without looking at the earlier versions.[12] This is "re-vision" in its most literal sense; imitation of Glück's rewriting method would lead a student to see his poem more as a whole which can be rethought than as a patchwork of good and bad sections. Another way of revising is to polish the parts before even constructing the whole; William Styron reports a need to perfect each paragraph before he goes on to the next, and Anthony Burgess speaks of writing novels one completed page at a time, with little or no revision of the book as a whole.[13] Each of these methods--and there are, of course, many others--results

in different kinds of work and, more importantly for the writing student, a different sense of how a piece of fiction or poetry comes into being.

The model I am proposing is, to some degree, utopian. There are constraints that would limit our ability to involve students in the different phases and variations of the writing process: time, of course; the relative dearth of texts that describe what writers actually do, though collections like 50 Contemporary Poets: The Creative Process and The Paris Review's Writers at Work interview series are a great help here; the ridiculous requirement of grading; and perhaps at the beginning of a term, students' possible unwillingness to surrender some measure of what they see as "self-expression" for imitation. In my own classes, I try to compromise on the last two points, requiring but not grading a great deal of imitative work and spending most of the class time on this, while basing the student's grade primarily on work of his own choice. This is not to suggest that students' own work and their imitative assignments are in opposition; doing exercises, I believe, can actually deepen self-discovery. In an essay on his own development as a poet Seamus Heaney describes the connection between such practice and "the real thing" this way:

> Learning the craft is learning to turn the windlass at the well of poetry. Usually you begin by dropping

> the bucket halfway down the shaft and winding up
> a taking of air. You are miming the real thing
> until one day the chain draws unexpectedly tight
> and you have dipped into waters that will continue
> to entice you back. You'll have broken the skin
> on the pool of yourself.[14]

Interestingly enough, many of my students find at the end of term that their best work, the writing most distinctively their own, is that in response to the assignments rather than that written independently. This reflects, I think, the liberating potential in assignments that lead the student to do something essentially artificial and even foreign to his initial sense of identity as a writer. As Richard Hugo puts it, the student who has "lost himself" in the problems of an exercise is "free to say what he never expected and always wanted to say."[15]

The workshop is undoubtedly the easiest and most obvious way to teach creative writing. It utilizes our critical skills at spotting and correcting problems in poems and stories; it gives us well polished work in which to take a kind of teacherly pride; and it flatters our students. At its best, however, the workshop produces superficially proficient but empty work, and at its worst it gives young writers a narrow and distorted idea of what writing actually <u>is</u>. Perhaps, as Peter Elbow suggests, writing cannot be taught but only learned.[16] Given the constraints of academic reality, no

class can lead students to experience the writing process exactly as writers do. But I think we owe it to our students--and, I would suggest, to the craft itself--to approximate that experience as best we can.

Exercises in the Process of Writing

Once we change our focus from the perfection of students' drafts to the development of potential writers, the writing exercise becomes central to teaching. The suggestions that follow are based on my research, my own teaching, and the experience of colleagues.[17] Centered on the imitation of different parts of the writing process, these exercises are intended not as precepts or keys to sure-fire success but as possible starting points from which teachers can devise their own assignments. The overall goals as I see them include students' exposure to a broad variety of ways of writing, development of students' sense of the problems and possibilities of the craft, and greater flexibility and less self-consciousness in their own writing methods. Exercises work best when they are treated as exercises. As I have mentioned, the arbitrary quality of some assignments can trigger creativity. Grading exercises, I think, has the opposite effect, as it discourages students from taking the kinds of risks that might lead to exciting work. For clarity, I have arranged these suggestions around the three stages of the writing process I noted earlier: generation, selection and arrangement, and revision. Many of the exercises overlap these categories and could be easily modified to apply to different stages of writing or to various levels of student ability.

I. Generation

Goals: To decrease students' initial anxieties about writing, to help them become more imaginative and flexible when they begin to write, and to give them a sense of potential.

General Techniques: Find out what they normally do in writing and have them change. Provide structures with specific tasks to keep them from worrying about what they're going to say.

Exercises:

A. Have students experiment with time, place and manner of writing for periods of two to three weeks.

1. Students who normally write at night should be required to write only in the daytime.
2. Those who write longhand should type.
3. Students should be asked to write in a variety of places: outdoors, in cafés, in moving vehicles, etc.
4. Ask for a brief description of students' writing methods. Then redistribute these descriptions and ask students to follow each others' methods.

B. Ask students to imitate different notebook procedures for a few weeks each.

1. Stipulate different kinds of entries: interesting lines, fragments, one-paragraph descriptions , imaginary dialogues, brief narratives. The notebook should be used differently from the way the student normally uses it.

2. Have them experiment with the frequency and amount of writing in their notebooks.
   a. Ask students to write at the same time every day.
   b. Ask students to write only in ten-minute periods, working quickly and putting down anything that comes to mind.[18]
   c. Require a certain number of pages to be completed each week, regardless of when they are written.

C. Provide starting points from which students complete different works.
   1. Have them build a poem or story from one word or a cliché.
   2. Ask them to write a poem based on a prose paragraph.
   3. Give them two apparently unrelated images or events and have them construct a story or poem based on the juxtaposition between the two.
   4. Have them build a story around the implications of a particular visual scene you have provided: a photograph, a painting, or a brief description. An alternate assignment would be to develop not a story but a list of significant questions about the scene.

D. Provide structures and "games" for students to complete.
   1. Ask students in class to write down a list of whatever words come to mind in three minutes, giving them one word with which to get started. Then have them write a poem in which each word on their lists is used in

order, with other words added in between but no alteration or omission from the list.

2. Have students transform a brief narrative of a personal experience by a series of metamorphoses, altering first the perceiver from the student to another person, then the narrative perspective from first to third person, then the setting, then the ages of the characters, etc.[19]
3. Have students write a poem in a particular form. To avoid doggerel, require half-rhyme and forms like syllabic meter and the sestina.

E. Ask students to do straightforward assignments with key elements altered or missing.

1. A description with no adjectives[20] or from the perspective of a blind man.
2. A self-analysis without using personal pronouns.
3. A narration of an emotionally charged scene which does not name the emotion.

II. Selection and Arrangement

Goals: To sharpen students' judgment of their own and others' unfinished work and to help them see new possibilities in what they've already written.

General Techniques: Ask them to make different selections and arrangements of previously written material, articulating which is best and why.

Exercises:

A. Have students choose different kinds of entries from their own and others' notebooks, clarifying the reasons for their decisions.

1. Ask students to choose the three most promising passages and define what makes them intriguing.
2. Have them pick the three best beginnings for a story or poem and speculate on what might follow.
3. Have students choose the three best conclusions and discuss what kinds of work they might conclude.
4. Ask students to select the three most confusing passages and describe how and why they are confused.

B. Have students experiment with the arrangement of selected notebook passages.

1. Have them select passages for the beginning, middle, climax, and ending scenes of a story and justify their choices. Then ask them to alter the order of the chosen scenes and discuss how the change affects the potential story. Alternate versions of this assignment could involve the teacher or other students making the changes that the student must discuss.
2. Ask them to complete a series of stanzas from lines selected from the notebooks and arrange the stanzas into a poem. Then have them alter the order of stanzas and discuss what this does to the poem. As with the fiction assignment above, the teacher or other students could also make the changes.

3. Have them experiment with the order of sentences within a paragraph chosen from their notebooks, developing as many different versions as possible and explaining the changes.

C. Ask them to write new versions of scenes and poems in their notebooks--not necessarily better drafts but parallel versions--and discuss the relation between these and the originals, determining the strengths and weaknesses of each version.

1. Have students experiment with different narrative perspectives, making parallel versions of the same scene in first person, third person limited, third person omniscient, etc.
2. Ask them to rewrite a poem or scene in a different tense.
3. Have students write out a poem as prose and then prepare several alternate patterns of lineation for it.
4. Have them change dialogue to narrative summary.
5. Have them rewrite one particular sentence as many different ways as possible.

III. Revision

Goals: Not so much to correct specific problems in drafts as to help students become aware of the variety of strategies for rethinking and developing their work.

General Techniques: Focus on the process of revision more than the quality of final drafts. A poem or story should be seen as a developing entity, with students examining the ways it can evolve in the process of revision.

Exercises: These are based on the imitation of three basic approaches to revision.

A. The "fix-it" approach, in which the writer completes a draft and then corrects particular problems, often on the draft sheet itself.

1. Ask students to identify faults and suggest changes in anonymous stories and poems from literary magazines.[21]
2. Have students consider two drafts of the same poem or story by a professional writer, discussing why the writer changed it the way he did.
3. Have students work with anonymous drafts of each others' stories or poems, defining and correcting the problems. An alternate approach would be to have one student note the problems on the draft and another do the revisions, each working independently and anonymously. Revised drafts should then be returned to their authors.

B. The "revise-as-you-write" approach, in which the writer makes certain each unit of his work has been perfected before he moves on to the next, making few changes once a complete draft has been written.

1. Divide students into small groups, each focussed on one part of a story or poem to be written: opening stanza, climax, conclusion, etc. Over several weeks, following the order of parts, ask each group to complete and perfect its unit and pass it on to the next group. Students should work only on their own part and only after the earlier parts have been finished. When the whole piece is done, discuss the different challenges each group faced and the strengths and weaknesses of the final product.
2. Ask students to compose a story or poem by writing one paragraph or stanza per class meeting, completing only one unit at a time and not changing a word after its completion. When the works are finished, discuss what happened over the course of writing and ask students to identify any new revisions now necessary in the pieces they have written.

C. The "rethinking" approach, in which the writer revises by making a series of complete drafts, with few changes on the draft sheets.
   1. Give students several complete drafts of the same anonymous story or poem, asking them to determine the order of drafts and cite evidence for their conclusions.
   2. Have students rewrite the same poem or brief story once a week for several weeks. Collect the drafts each week, so students cannot see what they have done previously. After

four or five drafts, have students examine the changes in the piece, determining at what stages significant developments occurred and why.

Notes

[1] Theodore Roethke, "How to Write like Somebody Else" in On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke, Ralph J. Mills, Jr., ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 69.

[2] Roethke, "The Teaching Poet" in On the Poet and His Craft, p. 47.

[3] Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 22-25, 48-49.

[4] Richard Hugo, The Triggering Town (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 56.

[5] Roethke's notebooks are included in the Theodore Roethke Papers at the Suzallo Library of the University of Washington. A selection from this huge body of material has been published in Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke, 1943-1963, David Wagoner, ed. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972). Stafford includes a page from his notebook at the end of his essay "A Way of Writing" in A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics, Stuart Friebert and David Young, eds. (New York: Longman, 1980), p. 5.

[6] Stafford describes his writing habits in "A Way of Writing." The information on Philip Levine is from a personal conversation in the fall of 1976.

[7] Yeats' journal, included in Memoirs, Denis Donoghue, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1972), contains many examples of prose notes and the poems derived from them. Joan Didion's comment on the origins of A Book of Common Prayer is from a lecture given at the University of California, Berkeley, in winter of 1976.

[8] David Wagoner, personal conversation, summer, 1978.

[9] Roethke, "The Teaching Poet," p. 46.

[10] Tess Gallagher, "Last Class with Roethke," The American Poetry Review, March-April, 1980, pp. 38-39.

[11] Mary McCarthy, interview with Elisabeth Niebuhr in Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Second Series, Van Wyck Brooks, ed. (New York: Viking, 1963), p. 289. Louis Simpson, comments on the writing of "The Hour of Feeling" in 50 Contemporary Poets: The Creative Process, Alberta T. Turner, ed. (New York: Longman, 1977), p. 285.

[12] Louise Glück, personal conversation, winter, 1978. Glück's description of the writing of "The Garden" is included in 50 Contemporary Poets, pp. 110-114.

[13] William Styron, interview with Peter Matthiessen and George Plimpton in Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, First Series, Malcolm Cowley, ed. (New York: Viking, 1958), p. 271. Anthony Burgess, interview with John Cullinan in Writers at Work:

The Paris Review Interviews, Fourth Series, Wilfrid Sheed, ed. (New York: Viking, 1975), p. 332.

[14] Seamus Heaney, "Feeling into Words" in Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978 (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980), p. 47.

[15] Hugo, p. 31.

[16] Elbow, p. ix.

[17] I'd especially like to thank my colleagues David Rosner, Dallas Wiebe, and Austin Wright for their helpful suggestions on fiction exercises.

[18] Elbow, pp. 3-9.

[19] David Rosner, who gave me this exercise, reports that it came originally from his own former teacher Stephen Minot.

[20] Roethke, "The Teaching Poet," p. 47.

[21] Dave Smith, "Passion, Possibility, and Poetry" in Poets Teaching: The Creative Process, Alberta T. Turner, ed. (New York: Longman, 1980), pp. 176-177.